

The Fight and the Destruction of Ghetto Białystok

December 1945

Testimony of Dr. Szymon Datner

Published by the former students of the Białystok Yiddish-Hebrew Gymnasium

Translated from Polish to Hebrew by Tzipora Eker-Survitz

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In memory of the 200,000 Jews of the Białystok region murdered by the Germans

Published on the internet in the website commemorating the Białystok Community initiated by the Białystok Landsmanschaft in Israel, and with the assistance of Mrs. Ewa Kracowska who checked the Polish spelling of the various names and places and added important comments

I dedicate this web site with the authentic testimony of **Dr. Szymon Datner**, to Staff Sergeant **Alexander Maszewicki** and to Captain **Omer Rubinowicz** (grandson of **Zevulun Rubinowicz** from Białystok), who fell in battle, Operation "Cast Lead" Gaza 2009. Alexander was the great grandson of the mathematician **Abraham Maszewicki**, director of the Yiddish-Hebrew Gymnasium in Białystok, grandson of **Joel Maszewicki**, partisan and a fighter against the Germans in WWII and **Lisa Maszewicki**, née **Czapnik**, a courier and a member of the Białystok underground.

Ada Holtzman, Tel Aviv 31.8.2009



Captain **Omer Rubinowicz** of blessed memory, fell in battle, Gaza 8.1.2009, in the age of 24 only



Staff sergeant **Alexander Maszewicki** of blessed memory, fell in battle, Gaza 6.1.2009, in the age of 22 only



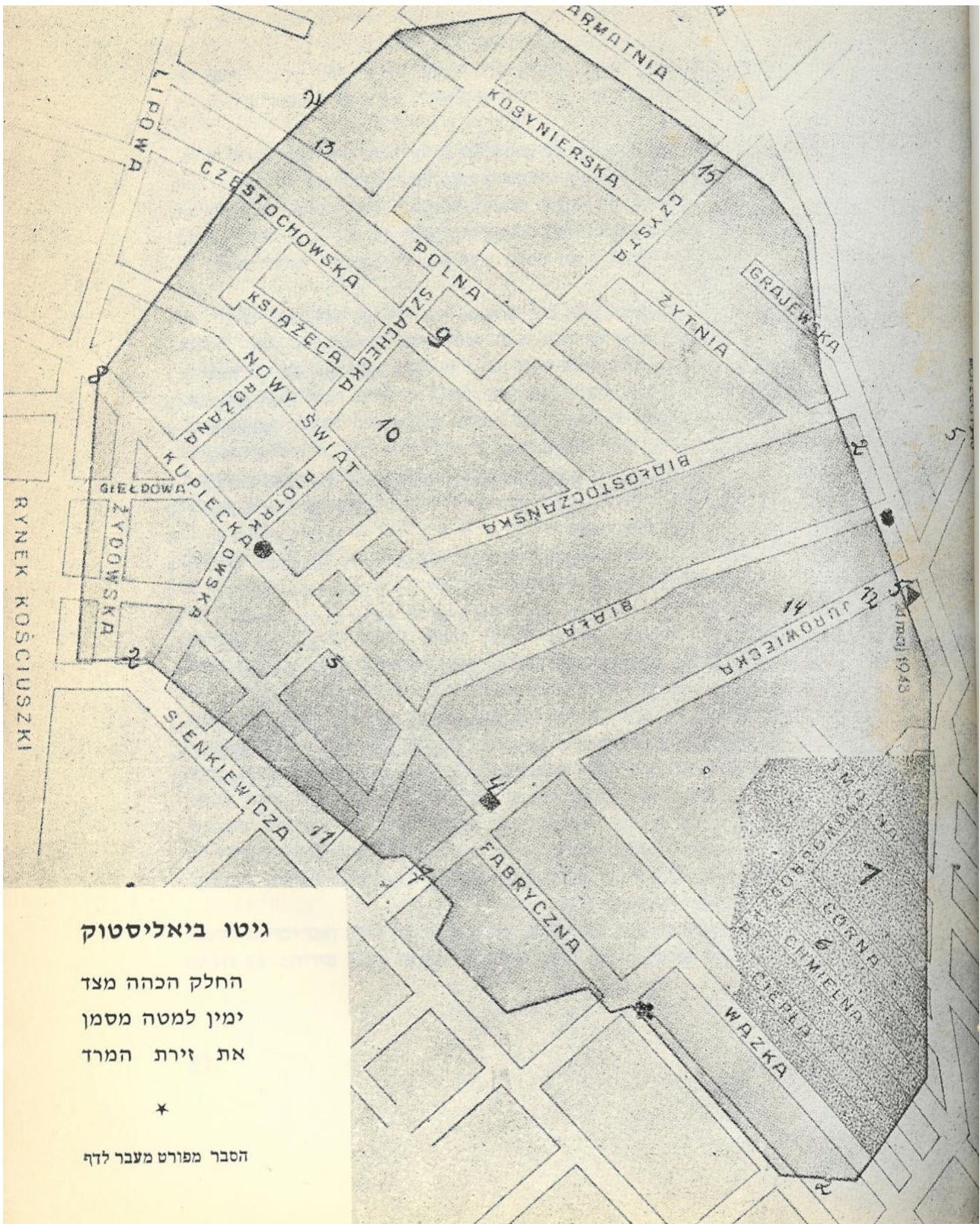
Lisa Maszewicki, née **Czapnik**

The 16th day of August 1943 closes a tragic-filled page of the Jewish History of Białystok, a period that began on June 22nd 1941, and was filled with indescribable suffering and torment that succeeded in the murder of 200,000 Jews. The Germans registered another easy victory, a complete victory in the war against the Jewish people.

The Germans did not immediately physically destroy the Jews; from their point of view it was a kind of humanistic procedure towards which the "master race" did not have special intentions.

At first, they sucked out their victims' vitality. They degraded their human dignity, they pushed them to the depths of financial ruin, they tortured them in a sophisticated manner of excruciating tortures and only then did they murder them: they knew no mercy, they spared no one – the baby in its cradle, a helpless old man, a defenseless woman, all were declared enemies, all of them were to be annihilated. The German death machine worked smoothly, thoroughly, with German precision, and with German inhuman cruelty.

When the German army entered the populated areas, they sowed death and destruction everywhere among the defenseless civil population, and they especially singled out the Jews, who were the first to be marked for destruction. After the mass killings, the atmosphere of terror escalated, its purpose being to suppress any desire or attempt to fight back. The Eastern territories were too large to be filled completely with gendarme. Only the fear from the gendarme was enough to keep the conquered peoples reined in.



גיטו ביאליסטוק

החלק הכהה מצד
 ימין למטה מסמן
 את זירת המרד



הסבר מפורט מעבר לדף

The Map of Ghetto Białystok. The darkened region at the bottom right is the area where the revolt had been.

The events that took place in Białystok after the outbreak of the war between the Soviet Union and Germany was a crushing blow to the Jews. The Germans entered the city on June 27, 1941 and immediately burned alive 800 to 1,000 men and young boys in the Great Synagogue. Afterwards, they burned the Szulhof (the yard of the Great Synagogue) and began the mass executions, by shooting pedestrians, and in this way, they murdered another 1,000 persons.

That same fatal Friday morning, a larger mechanized unit of Germans were concentrated on Siena Square (at the end of Mazowiecka Street); the Germans drank alcohol, and drunkenly, they surrounded the Szulhof.

The massacre began at 8:00 A.M. The Germans were divided into small groups. Armed with automatic guns and hand-grenades, they began to hunt Jews in the narrow alleys surrounding the Great Synagogue. Dante's pictures from Hell could be seen in the streets. They drove Jews out of their homes, stood them up against the wall and shot them. From everywhere, wretched groups of Jews were being led to the Great Synagogue which was burning in a huge fire, and from within could be heard horrible heartbreaking screams. The Germans forced their victims to push one another into the burning synagogue. Those who refused were shot, and their bodies were thrown in. After a while, the entire area was in flames. The soldiers threw hand grenades into the wooden houses which easily caught fire. The sea of flames that surrounded the entire Szulhof poured into the Legionowa, Stolarska, and Rynek Kościuszki Streets.

Until late in the afternoon, they drove the Jews into the burning synagogue, shot them in the streets and in their homes. The sound of exploding grenades mingled with the sounds of the gunshots, the shouts of the drunken Germans and the heart-breaking cries of the victims being murdered.

Towards the women, the Germans were "chivalrous". In principle, they did not kill them. But they forced them by beating and screaming to leave the burning area quickly, and before their very eyes, murdered their husbands, brothers, sons and fathers. In one instance, their great "chivalry" was displayed: **Ida Lewiatanska** née **Kriwiatynska** was 8 months pregnant, and when she ran from the Hell of Szulhof together with several other women and men, she encountered the Germans who shot about 200 Jews behind the Miodowka House on Legionowa Street. An older German saw **Ida's** predicament, and let her escape.

The synagogue burned several days. A fact worth pointing out about Białystok Jews about that "Black Friday": The Polish janitor of the synagogue (name unknown) took advantage of the momentary distraction on the part of the Germans, opened a window on the back wall, and through it, dozens of Jews managed to escape, among them **Pesach Frojnt**, the brother-in-law of the aforementioned **Ida Lewiatanska**. **Frojnt** died a few days later among the "Thursday"s dead. In the flames of the Great Synagogue were killed, among others, **Dr. Kracowski** known to all, the limping pharmacist **Polak**, the outstanding chess player **Zabłudowski**, and the popular entertainer **Alter Szteinberg**. The harvest of "Black Friday" was about 2,000 dead; the Szulhof neighborhood was burned and with it the following streets: Chazanowicz, Szkolna, Ciemna, Głucha, Stoarska, Zamojska, Suprasłska, Miodowa, Śledziowa, Brzozowa, Wersalska, Ordynacka, Legionowa. The Fish Market and Rynek Kościuszki were greatly damaged.

"The Friday" massacre shocked the Białystok Jews, but far worse experiences were to befall them in the not too distant future.

On Thursday, July 3, 1941, the first hunt took place: about 300 Jews, mostly belonging to the Intelligentsia, disappeared without a trace. They became known as "The Thursday Victims".

On Saturday, July 11, 1941, another hunt took place, this time on a larger scale: about 4,000 men were taken from the city by bus, and as it was revealed later, were shot in Pietrasze, about 2 kilometers from Białystok. These became known as "The Shabbat Victims".

The Germans set a ransom fee of 5 kilograms of gold, 20 kilograms of silver, as well as Soviet money, and in order to humiliate them, the Jews were forced to wear a yellow patch on their clothes. On August 1, 1941, they were closed into a ghetto.



Check-up in the entrance to the Ghetto

The "Judenrat" (Jewish Council) that was formed at the command of the Germans, actually had a single function: to supply the Germans with manpower that was abused without mercy and that helped the Gestapo rob Jews of their property in broad daylight.

From the regions of Szczecin, Grajewo, Tykocin, and Wasilków and smaller areas, reports were received of terrifying mass murders, encouraged by the Germans, by the local black reactionaries, and by hooligans.

In autumn 1941, the exile of the "non-workers" began to Prużany. This was a terrible path of suffering and brutality. About 6,000 Jews were transferred to Prużany and housed in homes of White Russians who were exiled to hard labor in Germany.

Jewish refugees from Vilna who came to Białystok told horrible tales about Ponary Paneriai in Lithuanian) and of the Lithuanians. Shocking reports came about the massacre in Slonim on the 14th of November 1941. Murder, humiliation, robbery, looting – these were the methods used by the Hitlerists towards the Jews until their last dying day.

The sudden change caused depression and destruction in the mental state of most of the Jewish ghetto-dwellers, who were desperate, accepting their fate, and awaiting helplessly for their death or for a miracle of survival.

But a group of youths recovered quickly from their helplessness and realized that the only way to act which human instinct dictates to all Jews is to fight the conqueror.

In autumn 1941, small groups of young Jews began to organize themselves, setting for themselves a goal to help the thousands of Russian soldiers imprisoned in the large P.O.W. camp, in the barracks of the 10th Infantry Regiment. The captives were cruelly oppressed, beaten and starved, frozen from the cold, tired from hard labor, and many died. In the ghetto, they secretly began to collect clothes, food, cigarettes, medicines, as well as money for the prisoners. Young Jewish boys and girls organized this project. Those who worked outside the ghetto conveyed these gifts to the Russian soldiers. On the barrack grounds, this was managed by **Zelig Dworecki** and **Abrasza Gerszuni**, together with a group of activists.

The assistance of the ghetto youth was expressed not only in material aid. The prisoners were provided with information on the positions in the front according to radio reports from Moscow and London, and a link was made to the outside world. Contact was established with the partisans, which enabled many prisoners to escape. The Jewish workers in the camp employed by "Heeresbaumt"^[1] initiated contact with the incarcerated soldiers mediated by the captive engineer **Ivanin** and the doctor of the camp. Transfer of information and gifts was conducted in the cellars of the hospital above the offices of the above-mentioned construction firm. This was all done with great secrecy, since anyone caught engaged in contact with the prisoners, was sentenced to death. One had to be careful not only from the Germans, but also from informers and Włosow's^[2] people and also Jews who were afraid for their own skin. Similar help was organized at various points of the city where prisoners and Jews worked. Contact between the captives in the barrack area of the 10th Infantry Regiment continued until the middle of 1942, that is, even after the work of the construction firm had been completed.

In this way, the ghetto expressed its readiness to fight as well as its love for those who were a living symbol of the demand for human rights, and were united in the hope for victory over the Hitleristic animal.



Forced labour in Ghetto Białystok

With time, the various groups united under one organization, "The Anti-Fascist Council", whose members were **Rywka Szinder**, **Lejb Mandelblit**, **Joske Kawe**, and others. Among the founders of the council was the senior Polish communist **Jakubowski**, who hid within the ghetto. This organization was in contact with the "Anti-Fascist Council" that was active outside of the ghetto, whose members included the above-mentioned **Jakubowski**, **Władysław Nieśmiałek**, **Feliks Lorek**, **Niura Czwiakowska**, and others.

In addition, the young people who were the "Hashomer Hatzair" and the "Halutz" movements, who came from Vilna at the end of 1941, set up two kibbutzim that cooperated with one another. All the above organizations set themselves a goal to train their members for an armed struggle against the Germans. Unfortunately, for a very long time, the initiators were not able to unite the groups into one common organization. This had a fateful effect on the resistance movement of the ghetto, and caused many unnecessary deaths and eventually to total failure, the dimensions of which could have been reduced under other conditions.

The recognition that armed struggle is mandatory penetrated slowly among the youth. First of all, the need for arms was recognized. There were no weapons in the ghetto, but at many German points there was a huge stock-load of weapons. Thus started the smuggling of weapons to the ghetto. The Jewish workers stole weapons from the "Beutestellen" – the weapons in the occupation warehouses. They cut off the handles of the guns to facilitate their transfer. They left the wooden parts behind and afterwards added the missing parts in the carpentry of the ghetto. They concealed the weapons among the heating materials and passed them through the ghetto gates. The handles were placed inside steel pipes or inside hollow wooden beams.

During the first few months of 1942, the activities of the various youth groups permeated with a revolutionary spirit, increased. New groups came into existence without knowing that near them other similar groups with the same purpose were already in existence. There is no doubt that the improvement at the front greatly encouraged the scope of activity. Leningrad held on. The Germans were driven away from Moscow; the great suffering caused to the German soldiers due to the harsh winter (among others, I saw with my own eyes, transports of filthy and frozen Germans that were being brought to the military hospital), all the facts that were a secret to no one, added encouragement to the doomed Jews imprisoned in the ghetto and for the youth it posed a challenge for a struggle. On May 1st, 1942, posters appeared calling Jews to go to war and fight against the conqueror.

In view of these posters, it must be pointed out that, in principle, these organizations abstained from mass publicity of their group activities. The difficult conditions of spreading any type of propaganda or in the ghetto must be emphasized. The indescribable atmosphere of terror, a large camp with informers willing to talk for money or even for free, recognition that there exists a collective responsibility and the sanctions that stem from it directly and cumulatively that were carried out with decisive cruelty unprecedented in the annals of humanity – all these made very difficult the work of the resistance movements. This also impeded its expansion to become a mass movement. Every desire for revolt or a struggle could cause partial or complete destruction of the ghetto. Those who did not experience life in the ghetto must remember these facts when pondering sometimes how the Jews could seemingly agree so easily to being put to death without any resistance.

In the Spring and Summer of 1942, rumors infiltrated the ghetto about German terror ravaging Warsaw and in every region of the Generalgouvernement (General Government), about the battles of the Polish underground and about the establishment of the Polish Workers' Party, that issued a call for an armed struggle against the conqueror, and about strengthening the partisan battles in the area of Kielce and Lublin. This news encouraged the activists' movement in the Białystok Ghetto, but the difficulties of communication and the absence of suitable activists for the revolt movement in the Białystok area, forced the ghetto to rely only on its limited forces.

The first half of 1942 passed relatively quietly. It seemed that certain stability set in the lives of the Jews, as if the German monster had drunk enough blood. The report of the "action" in the Warsaw Ghetto – on July 22, 1942 – the largest Jewish center in Europe (more than half a million Jews), hit them like thunder on a clear day. The secret was revealed behind Jews transferred from the settlements, the small towns, and were being concentrated into several large centers.

It was not about reducing the damaging influence of the Jews on the gentile environment, as the Germans claimed, and as some Jews believed or wanted to believe. Now it became apparent that the purpose of concentrating the Jews was to technically facilitate the physical murder of the Jewish population. This truth did not penetrate into the consciousness of those responsible for the destiny of the Jews incarcerated in the ghettos. It is possible as well that the fathers of the Judenrat did not want to see the truth and preferred to hide this truth from the masses.

The Jewish youth of the ghetto, organized in the Komsomol (Комсомол, United Communist Youth), the "Halutz" and "Hashomer Hatzair", who were not corrupted by drinking and prostitution that was prevalent in the community, reacted to the news from Warsaw with an enhanced effort to recruit to its ranks a healthy and honest element towards its struggle.

Many joined the resistance movement willingly; 99% of them youth of both sexes, from every political faction. Most of the older ones who joined were previously from the lines of the Communist laborers (**Judyta Nowogródzka, Rywka Szynder, Joske Kawe, Adela Herc, Julek Jakubowicz, Leibusz Mandelblit, Welwel Wołkowski**, and others). Arms smuggling into the ghetto increased, but a short time later, it became clear that this was only a partial and weak solution to the hunger for arms. They began to search intensively for professionals that could produce any type of weapon. Small workshops were set up with reliable personnel for producing hand-made grenades. The chemists put together explosives and filled bottles and electric bulbs with toxic acids (mainly vitreolum); they soldered hot, short and long firearms in the workshops of the locksmiths, created missing parts, handles and long steel knives.

Illegal political information played an important part for the resistance movement of the ghetto. It was forbidden for Jews to purchase or read German newspapers, but there were thousands of ways for Jews to receive them from outside, and for a long time, these were sold at exorbitant prices in the streets of the ghetto. They read mainly "Białystoker Zeitung", "Das Reich", "Prusische Zeitung", and "Königsberger Zeitung". They were less interested in "Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung", "Völkischer Beobachter", and others. They tried to learn from the press, if the downfall of the Germans, for which they so longed, was near.

The general opinion, held by almost all, was that the defeat of the Germans will no doubt come. There was just no guarantee if the residents of the ghetto will remain alive until liberation, and this oppressed them. With bated breath, they followed the fate of the brave struggle near Stalingrad, as well as the course of the battle in Libya.

They whispered with concern about El-Alamein, as the fate of the Jews in Eretz Israel depended on the results of these battles. They diligently read between the lines, attentively dwelt upon the political incidents, in the factories, at home, in the street, and they spread fabricated stories as if they were actual events. The dates forecasting the end of the war multiplied, and when one date passed uneventfully, the masses did not stop believing; they continued to hope. When more and more European blood was being spilled by the Germans, when portions of the Jewish nation were destroyed one after the other like trees severed from their trunk, when it penetrated into the minds of the Jews that they remained alive and were waiting for liquidation, the recognition that in order to establish a "New Europe" and a "New European Order" not only the lives of men and women need to be sacrificed, but also difficult sacrifices of small Jewish children. For this reason, the ghetto was in constant extreme nervous tension, remembering the terrible beatings of the previous day, and the daily unceasing fear of complete destruction, and so it became a broad field of easily accepting anything irrational and inconceivable as if it were true.

It was obvious that all articles relating to Jews were of special interest. And the Jews deceived themselves that maybe there will be a change in the German policy towards them, and that the Hitler regime will revise its inhuman position in this regard, that there will be a change in the original plan of total destruction. Each week they read with special interest the Goebbels article in "Das Reich". The objective evaluation of these articles did not offer any reason for optimism, and Hitler's few speeches that were publicized did not express any kind of surrender in this area. The speech where he threatened unequivocally that "the Jews who always laughed, now the laughter will be frozen on their faces" left an especially severe impression upon them.

The radio played an even more important role in the ghetto than the press. Possession of a radio and listening to broadcasts were forbidden to the non-German populace at the threat of punishment by death. Despite that, listening to radio broadcasts was widespread among the Jews. Workers outside of the ghetto listened in their various German places of work. Jewesses who served in German households listened when their "masters" went to town. In the ghetto itself, they listened to broadcasts from radios built by amateur technicians. Almost every single youth movement possessed its own radio. These were concealed in underground hiding places. The news was edited into special bulletins and read at the group meetings. There were also informants. It is known that due to a report from an informer, the owners of a house on Jurowiecka Street were shot to death after a radio was found on their premises.

The tranquil quiet of the first 10 months of 1942 was clouded by rumors of horrible massacres that took place during the destruction of the Słonim Ghetto, as well as the rumor that 10 Jewish doctors and pharmacists were shot in Wołkowysk (Vawkavysk) in August 1942. These two events were related to Jews extending assistance to Soviet partisans.

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Difficult days passed over the ghetto in November 1942. On the 2nd of November, the destruction of the ghettos in the region of Białystok began, with the exception of the Białystok Ghetto, and sections of Jasionówka and Grodno. Early Monday morning, the SS men surrounded the ghetto while its populace was not aware that anything extraordinary was about to happen. The ghetto dwellers were expelled from their homes, concentrated in the main squares, markets, or places of commerce, and were loaded on previously recruited wagons, and while these helpless were being tormented, they were driven to Kielbasin, Bogószów, Zambrów, Wołkowysk, and to the barracks of the 10th Infantry regiment near Białystok. From there, after only one-tenth remained, (many, many died from starvation, diseases, and inhuman treatment) were loaded on trucks and deported to the East.

In the months of January through March 1943, about 130,000 Jews from the Białystok region perished in gas chambers and in the ovens of Treblinka. Only a small group that dared not to obey the edict and did not appear in the concentration places was saved. They escaped to the forest where most of them died, of starvation and of frost or from the bullets of the German gendarmes, or at the hands of their local persecutors or those hired by the Germans from the circles of the NSZ (Narodowe Sily Zbrojne, National Armed

Forces of Poland). The lesser brave ended their lives in suicide. Only very few succeeded in hiding inside the ghetto in Białystok.

The tragic condition of the Jews that dared to escape was worsened by the terrible terror enforced by the Germans towards the Polish populace. They threatened to burn down their homes and to execute them if they conceal any of the escaping Jews.

There were additional reasons. The atmosphere of hate prevailed among Polish society, having penetrated systematically for years and without punishment by the ultra-nationalist Endeków Narodowa Demokracja party, the extreme Fascist and the [Sanacja](#) Fascist movements. There was an atmosphere of dissatisfaction and hostility towards the Jews that had been implanted for a long time before the war, by uninterrupted indoctrination calling for an economic and social boycott. This was achieved by university riots, in institutions of higher learning where scoundrels donning academic caps preached, Numerus Clausus and Numerus Nullus, racist clauses in the law, the famous ban of the "*Shechita*" ("ritual slaughter") " by Ms. Fristor, or the infamous saying of Major General Sławoj Składowski "Yes indeed" and his boycott units.

Opposite such a cruel enemy like the Germans and opposite the Polish populace which suffered great losses being tortured by German terror, there was no chance for a mass action to save the Jews in Poland. The percentage of surviving Jews could have been without doubt much greater, had there been a friendlier psychological atmosphere.

Such an atmosphere would not have existed if the Sanacja regime would not have befriended the Germans, heeded faithfully all the 1934 agreement and carried out against the Jews all the unapproved paragraphs stemming from the spirit of that agreement.

An admirable exception should be mentioned: some of the Polish intelligentsia who for many years had the tradition of freedom and rebellion. Also hundreds of Poles, people of good-will scattered throughout the country, mainly farmers that dared to be brave human beings, and despite endangering themselves, they concealed or cared for the Jews who were being persecuted like animals. They deserve the highest award; it may be proclaimed one day: "The Humanity Prize". Many hundreds of Jews in the region of Białystok owe their rescue and survival, first and foremost, to the courage, sacrifice, and mercy of these Polish farmers. (Their names will once be engraved in letters of gold in the history of the Polish nation, but as yet their names cannot be disclosed, as cannot those Jews who were saved, some of whom are still being persecuted by the NSZ and some paid with their lives for their nobility and grace.)

After the destruction of the other ghettos, the Białystok ghetto with 60,000 men, and the Łódź ghetto remained as the last Jewish islands afloat in the sea of ruination and cemeteries of Polish Jews.

For how long? This question disturbed children, adults and the elderly. The horror evoked by the name [Treblinka](#) was on everyone's lips. A flyer on Treblinka, issued by one of the underground Polish organizations in Warsaw, that was duplicated and distributed in the ghetto at the end of 1942, created indescribable fear and anxiety. The dry and matter-of-fact description of the "showers and the chimneys" (the Gas

Chambers and the Crematoriums) shocked the entire region of Białystok. The mystery of where were all the transports of hundreds of thousands of Jews being transferred from the Warsaw ghetto to "work in the East", was solved. The secret of half a million Jews disappearing between the region of Warsaw and Małkinia was revealed. The flyer directed to the Polish public informed them about the construction of huge ovens: crematoria, where the next in line, the Poles, were to be destroyed. The manifest ended with a call for an armed struggle against the German invader.

Very slowly, reports penetrated into the closed ghettos of the places where Jews were being concentrated, as if they were being transported to work, and for the time being, no one ever saw anyone return from there. Majdanek, Auschwitz, Bełżec, Minsk^[3] these were names that evoked feelings of horror among the Jews. Around these names, stories of unbelievable monstrosities were being told that actually occurred, and that these places were mass torture centers of Jews from all of Europe. For the Jews of Białystok who remembered the "auto de-fé"^[4] not far from the square on the day the Germans entered the city and those who remembered the victims of "Thursday" and those of the "Shabbat" and knew of the massacres of Słonim and Vilna, - they had no basis for any illusions as to what lay ahead for them. And despite this, "level-headed" Jews and optimistic Jews refused to believe that in the heart of Europe places designated for mass murder could exist.

The same people, relying on the facts of mass murder well-known to the Białystokers, claimed that if the Germans had meant to kill all the Jews, they would not hesitate to carry this out immediately at the onset and on spot. What reason would they have to arrange for transports and to supervise them? Why use means and forces which could be used better in other fronts? The atrocities done to the Jews relied on the will of the soldiers to "amuse themselves", while escaping from the supervision of their commander, especially on the warfront (the Germans began the crimes of mass murder immediately upon their entrance into the city).

The above explanations, that between the anti-Jewish propaganda and the complete destruction of the Jews – there is a large gap, persuaded many people. It was very difficult to check out the facts that here and there seeped into the ghetto from distant places. Contact with the world outside the ghetto was very difficult and life-threatening. The scarce news which penetrated the ghetto could be true or deceiving at the same time.

The first ten months of 1942 passed relatively quietly which had the effect of causing residents to dream of a positive future. The stubbornness of reiterating the pessimistic reports and stories of "Aktionen" in the central Generalgouvernement region, in White Russia and the Ukraine, aroused more and more doubts.

Practically the only subject being discussed in the homes of the ghetto dwellers and their workplaces was whether they would survive the war. Reports of disputes and existing differences supposedly between the German Army, the Nazi party, and the Gestapo, raised high hopes, although they were erroneous. Many believed that the German failures in the East, the growing expectation that a second front will be opened in the West, and the increasing possibility of a definite German defeat, will cause a crisis in the front due to mass revolt on the part of the soldiers. They also believed in a revolution "from above" which would result in the government transferring to the German headquarters, who will

dismiss Hitler and will retreat from the policy of mass destruction of the conquered population (a policy for which a high price would have to be paid in case of a German defeat in the war). – and will change the policy significantly and return to them the human rights taken away by the Hitlerites.

They deceived themselves into believing that a short time after the military revolt, a peace treaty would be signed, and then they would be saved and the remnants of the tormented Jewish people will survive. The belief in a speedy German military defeat and especially their belief in the recovery of the German people, who in the past held one of the foremost positions in the family of cultured nations, accompanied the Białystok Jews to their last day of final destruction. Even in the death trains en route to Treblinka and Majdanek, many believed they were indeed being brought to labor camps, as the Germans constantly announced, and did not believe of the possibility that their train ride would end in death.

And of what were they guilty? Why was their verdict the death sentence? The pessimists of the ghetto believed in the downfall of the Germans and assumed that the German Army will break down deep inside the Soviet Union (at the time of the liquidation of the ghetto, the frontline was about 800 kilometers East of Białystok). They claimed that the Gestapo will always have enough time to liquidate the remaining Jews who would be unwanted witnesses. They also pointed out that it would be difficult to base oneself on the existing differences, supposedly, between the Gestapo and the German army, since in Białystok 1,000 Jews were burned in the Great Synagogue and were shot en masse already on the first day the Germans entered the city and afterwards all the kidnappings, imprisonment and murder of 5,000 victims on "The Thursday" and on "The Shabbat", and all these were not conducted by the Gestapo, that did not yet exist, but rather by the Wehrmacht. It was difficult to imagine that Hitler as a skilled organizer would not fill this important position in the German headquarters with one of his own people. They pointed out the typical thinking of the German psychosis, which is accustomed to blind obedience and strict execution of orders without questioning who is giving the order and what is the ethic background of the person giving the order.

The circles of the Ghetto intelligentsia analyzed in great detail and frequently encouraged each other that there are forces that are not taking part in the war effort and that the Germans must be considerate of their opinion as they will no doubt intervene in favour of the Jews in Europe who are being doomed to destruction and are in the hands of Hitler. They pointed out the tremendous authority of the Pope and the International Red Cross, the neutral countries with which Germany had diplomatic and commercial relations. A great impact was made with the announcement given by the Gestapo that all Jews of non-Polish and non-Soviet citizenship register themselves. From this, they understood that this is related to the exchanging of German detainees in Anglo-Saxon countries. Several dozen persons showed up to register, but it resulted in naught.

It was a great surprise that a Jewish woman with 2 children was granted a permit to travel to her husband in Palestine. They concluded from this that the Jews abroad did not forget their brethren, and that they are doing their utmost to rescue them.

For a long time, a rumor circulated in the ghetto, no one knowing its source, that shortly all the Jewish children will be moved to Sweden together with their mothers, and that a

Swedish delegation of the Red Cross is already on its way. Everyone told one another an amusing story about a certain woman who when told of her being transferred, became very annoyed and announced that she would not leave "*as what would happen to her property?*" To our dismay, no one arrived and no delegation ever arrived.

They waited in vain near the illegal offices, listening attentively, hoping to hear encouraging news. They waited to hear a condemnation of the horrible great crime being executed upon a helpless people awaiting salvation. But a clear veto was not heard from Rome, there was no protest from Geneva, there was no diplomatic mediation from the neutral countries. The voice of those who could have saved hundreds of thousands of children was silent.

In spite of this, in the fall of 1942, a rumor circulated in the ghetto that the "practical" Germans, after murdering the Jews, use their oil in manufacturing soap. Each whispered to the other that in the German soap they used in the ghetto, a major ingredient was oil from the Jews. "RIF" was the industrialized mark on this soap and there were those who deciphered this to be the acronym for "Rein Idish Fett" (pure Jewish oil). There were those who joked about this; many believed it and everyone was depressed. A feeling of heavy distress descended upon them, like a stone in everyone's heart caused by the insecurity in all concerning the German plots of evil, and the fear of what is to occur, on the days to come.

The rumors about Treblinka and the other death camps and the liquidation of the ghettos in the peripheral areas, speeded up the decision to unite all the resistance groups in the Białystok Ghetto.

At first, the Marxist groups: "Hashomer Hatzair" and the "Bund" united into one group with a common leadership. Some time later, Block "B" was established comprised of: "Hechalutz", "Dror", "Hanoar Hatzioni", "Beitar", and "Hashomer Hatzair". "Hashomer Hatzair" which was a member in both organizations, was the communications link between the two organizations. Discussions on uniting the two organizations continued and were dragging due to ideological doctrines and frequently due to various personal ambitions. These were the factors that greatly affected the failure of the opposition groups during the "first Aktion" (akcja, action) in the Białystok Ghetto on February 1943.

Meanwhile, the two blocks made feverish efforts to arm their members; they made contact with Germans and purchased weapons from them. These included: **Chajka Grosman**, **Bronia Winicka**, **Buba Rubinstein**, and **Maryla Różycka**, who later became a brave liaison of the partisans. The main weapons warehouse was with **Szulem Korzec** on Ciepła Street: he was the one who also organized listening to radio broadcasts by **Szalom Obiedzinski** a mathematics teacher from Grajewo (who fell in the ranks of the Red Army in 1944). The workshops for arms in the small grenades factory were run by Engineer **Henoch Farber** in the basement under his apartment at 8 Ciepła Street.

Recruiting for the groups, being done very carefully (up to the liquidation of the ghetto, there was not a single failure), increased the number of fighters. The ghetto was divided into areas and each area into blocks and these into the smallest unit of triples. They taught their members to use the firearms.



Maryla Różycka

Contacts were made with Poles and Russians outside of the ghetto in order to set up a common leadership in the war against the conqueror.

One of these contacts was severed, as the Germans incidentally came upon the Russian officers' organization on Cygańska Street. The place is remembered for the great deal of shooting which took place, staff members were killed and a large portion of the weapons were taken from the arms warehouse. In this operation, **Sybirak** fell in battle, the brave commander of the partisans from the area of Białowieża.

A link was established with Polish clerks who worked in the Registration and Local Identification Department, and "Aryan papers" were obtained for the fighting organizations. The members were equipped with bromide poison and it was penetrated into their conscience not to fall alive into the hands of the Germans and if they are discovered, they must swallow the poison and thus avoid being tortured.

Together with strengthening their self-defense, the idea of organizing into groups of partisans, who would leave the ghetto and fight the conqueror in the forests, was born. This caused many strong quarrels: those opposing the idea of partisanship claimed that departing from the ghetto and leaving it in the hands of those incapable of fighting, such as unarmed women and children, is not more than an escape out of fear and besides, the odds of fighting in the forest are not greater, considering the strange environment and lack of preparation for the way of life in the forest.

Those supporting the idea of partisanship, claimed on the contrary, that an armed struggle within the closed ghetto taking into account the existing German military technical equipment and its immense superiority, is committing a suicide. If the ghetto is doomed, then at least all those capable of fighting should fight in such a place where they might cause the Germans heavy casualties, that is, in the forests. In this way, if they cannot rescue their beloved ones, at least they can avenge their death.

The arguments surrounding the method of fighting against the conqueror even divided the Communist youth. The energetic and nimble **Judyta Nowogródzka**, who did not support the opposition after being removed from the organization by the "elders", established a new organization whose only purpose was to set up partisan battalions.

As early as December 1942, the first partisan group left the ghetto. These were well armed young people called "Krynki's people", named after Krynki, the home town from which most of them stemmed. Their commander was "**Brave Maksim**" (a borrowed name). They caused human fatalities and purchased a great deal of arms. Some weeks later, in an incident near Lipowy Most (the Lipa bridge), the Germans were forced to retreat despite their advantage in numbers and weapons. The Germans left behind 6 dead and 4 injured, and **Maksim** died a hero's death. His death caused a crisis in the battalion; most members returned to the ghetto for the winter and prepared to go out again into the forest in the spring. The activities of "Krynki's people" awakened much sympathy for the idea of partisanship among the ghetto's youth.

The events that occurred some time later proved the supporters of partisanship to be right. At the beginning of February 1943, an official Soviet announcement was made to the world: General (Generalfeldmarschal) Friedrich Paulus together with the remnants of the

6th Army surrendered to the Soviet army. Stalingrad was saved. This was a turning point in the annals of the WWII. The report from the headquarters of the Red Army on the 3rd of February read: The battle over Stalingrad has come to its end! Previously, the Germans suffered a decisive defeat at El Alamein.

The Red Army began its victory journey and the Allies commenced their attack in Africa. In the Białystok ghetto, feelings of joy following these victories were mingled with doubt and despair.

On the 25th of January 1943, the Germans liquidated the last ghetto in the region, Jasionówka. At the beginning of February, heavy clouds of mass slaughter loomed over the Białystok ghetto. From **Efraim Barasz**, the "king of the ghetto", the Judenrat learned that the Germans are asking for "blood-spillage" and from the Judenrat, severe bitter rumors circulated on the streets that caused terrible despair. People moved in the streets as if drugged and the sign of death could be read on their faces.

Life in the streets became silent; the laughter and noise disappeared. The sight of the young children was heart-breaking: apathetic and extinguished, as if they knew the fate that awaited them.

Who can describe the torment of the parents who were aware of their fate, lingering in absolute helplessness against the impending destruction? Winter prevented any going out into the forest. The ghetto diligently prepared its passive defense. Practically in every house, a hiding place was prepared. At night, ditches and subterranean bunkers were dug, which reduced the size of the rooms, and near a standing wall they erected an additional artificial wall, to create halls to be used as hiding places. The entrances to the attics and the basements were camouflaged.

In this method, the lamb intended to defend itself from the devouring beast. Among the determined youth, a phrase was heard: we will not surrender; we will not go as sheep to the slaughter! But there were no arms except for poles, sticks, and steel rods.

The organization was weak, its commanders: hesitant and inexperienced. The mood was depressing, it was difficult to die so young, and especially such a wretched death, a dog's death.

On the night between the 4th and 5th of February, the Judenrat ordered its clerks to hide together with their families in the factories, and at the same time, provided them with fictitious permits of clerks on duty, and thus at the last minute, managed to rescue its people. Those who shared the secret already knew that the Gestapo in Białystok got notice from Treblinka and Majdanek, that there were "available places" in the gas chambers and the crematoria. They therefore demanded from the head of the Judenrat, Engineer **Barasz**, that he supplies them with 6,000 "non-productive workers".

Barasz, instead of then calling upon the masses: "Defend yourselves, anyone who can!" or "Save yourselves, anyone who can!" or instead of shooting himself as did **Czerniakow** in Warsaw, **Barasz** gave in to the demands of the Germans. He believed that if he would hand over 6,000 of his brethren, he will then save the remaining 50,000.

His greatest crime was that he agreed to this horror, that he believed the Germans and lied to the masses that had trusted him.

From that day on, the halo of the all-powerful rescuer of the ghetto, Engineer **Barasz** evaporated. Since that time, he appears as a tragic partner in the murder of the Jewish people who survived an additional half-year together with his crime, and dragged down with him to the abyss the remainder of the ghetto.

On Friday, the 5th of February, at 4:00 A.M. early in the morning, the Germans entered the ghetto. The first "Aktion" began. **Barasz** walked at the head with the Gestapo holding the list in his hands, and crying out the names doomed to die. (In the mood of the ghetto, of those doomed to be hung, this sight was later described as: "**Barasz** cut the ribbon").

The Jewish police (the "Ordnungsdienst") helped **Barasz** in his "righteous" operation by destroying hiding places and exposing the secret places where Jews were hiding. There were also Jews without shame or conscience who looted the apartments of those pitiful ones who were doomed to die. Several dozen informers walked around in the streets and found the hiding places of the Jews, and pointed them out to the Germans with the price of saving their own miserable lives, for the time being.

Barasz, the Jewish police, and the "*Mosrim*" (the informers) have become symbols of shame and contempt of the suffering and torment of millions. Self defense was a complete failure. Some of the commanders lost their heads, and others shared the fate of their brethren in the ghetto. The lack of a defense plan gave its signs as did the split into factions and the lack of a united organization. In the bunkers, the youth groups waited in vain for a sign of an armed resistance.

The report that the Germans do not touch the factories and those workers hiding in them with their families - had a very negative effect. Some organizations ordered their members to hide in the factories and they would protect them only if the Germans will attack that area. The incidents of resistance were temporary and uncoordinated.

On 29 Kupiecka Street, **Ichhak Melamed** spilled acid on a group of SS men. One of them became blind, the second got burned, and in his confusion, shot and killed his friend. **Melamed** took advantage of the commotion and escaped. The Germans, seething with rage, took 100 people: men, women, and children out of the adjacent houses and killed them in the Praga Garden, and warned if the criminal does not surrender himself within 6 hours, another 1000 will be killed. **Melamed** showed up at his own good will; he was tortured and hanged at the gate of the house on Kupiecka Street. Before he was executed, he managed to make an enthusiastic speech against the Germans in which he predicted a decisive defeat and revenge.

Short time later, on that same Kupiecka Street, the **Kurianski** family spilled boiling water on the Germans who immediately murdered the entire family. On Ciepła Street, **Fryda Feld** and **Bluma Laks** threw hand grenades on the Germans. These 2 heroines were killed immediately after their attack.

On Smolna Street, a group of about 20 young men led by **Edek Boraks**, the military commander of the "Hashomer Hatzair" set off a brief but strong resistance against the Germans which resulted in heavy casualties.

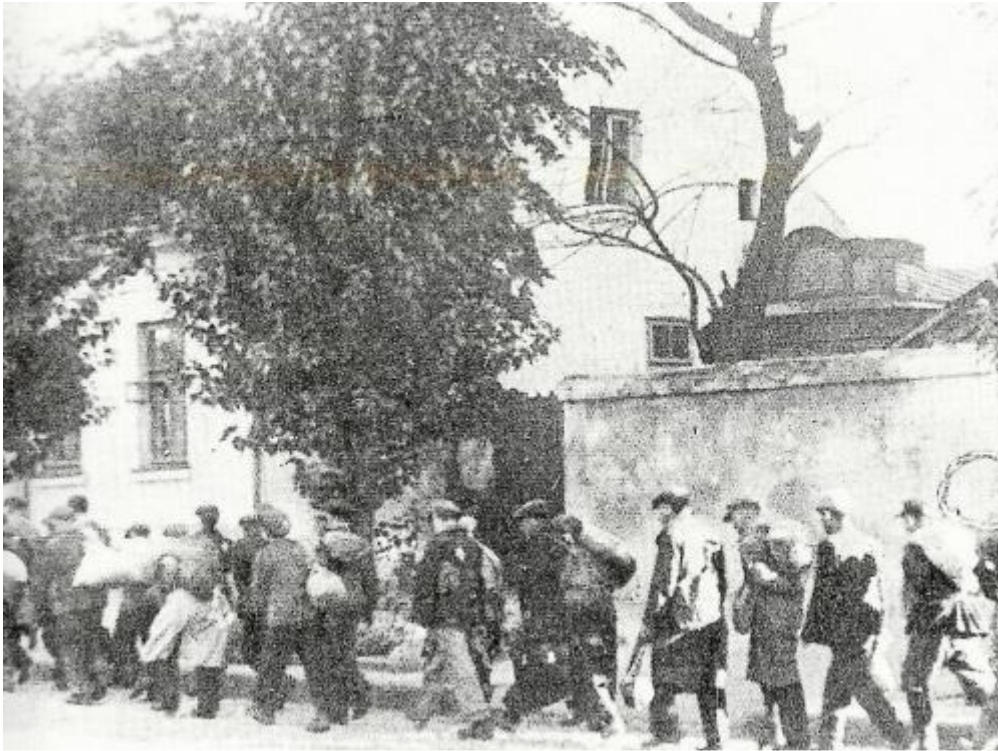
Those who escaped the trains of death on the way to Treblinka, told in the ghetto of the revolt of the doomed ones in the train car near the gates of the camp. The leader of the revolt was **Boraks** who together with his friends fell in battle and did not permit the Germans to put them into the gas chambers of death nor in the crematoria.



Edek Boraks

On 19 Chmielna Street, 17 people barricaded themselves in an attic; these were 8 young men and 9 young women: **Lolek Minc, Zula Dworecki, Israel Sternfeld, Abram Gerszuni, Rachel Rozenstein** and others. All were "armed" with acid and axes. They decided not to surrender as long as they were alive. With the help of the Jewish Police, the Germans found their hideaway. From the attic opening, the defenders threw upon them bottles with vitriol and attacked them with axes. Two Germans were injured and the conquerors receded. A siege began. The Germans began shooting at them with automatic machine guns and when they realized that those inside had no firearms, they stormed into the attic, and forced them onto the street. There they stood them in a line against the wall, conducted a careful search and made a quick judgment: "Who did this?" – the first in line, an experienced weaver, just tightened his lips. A shot was heard. The limping **Sternfeld** acted the same. The third in the row pointed to the dead **Sternfeld**: "He did it!" The German criminals were content with two victims and led the others with raised hands to a central place (where the captives were being concentrated) on the corner of Kupiecka and Jurowiecka Streets at the gate of the large Judenrat sewing workshop.

From here, in groups of several hundreds, Jews were led to Fabryczna Street, to Freedom Square, to Sienkiewicza Street, and the transports of the doomed continued to the Poleska train station. Here they were loaded onto wagons and deported to Treblinka. At the Poleska train station, the metals worker **Abrashka** (his family name is still unknown) took advantage of a moment when the SS men were distracted, and climbed on top of the wagon and held a brief enthusiastic speech. In his hands, he held his little baby boy who was a few months old. The doomed ones shocked by the atrocities inside the wagons, and the Poles who were not far from there, heard his exhilarating words on the victory over the German monster near Stalingrad as well as the soon-to-be definite defeat of the frightened Germans, who can only be victorious over the defenseless. He ended his speech with "We are going to die, but very soon they will join us", pointing to the approaching murderers. A barrage of shots hit him, and he fell down together with his baby.



Ghetto Białystok: Deportation of the Jews

The first Aktion that was called "the February Massacre" lasted 7 days, from the 5th to the 12th of February and 15,000 victims fell, among them 2,000 who were killed on the spot. The epilog of the bloody week took place at the famous "15" (the headquarters of the Gestapo on Sienkiewicza Street). 15 young persons with Aryan papers were arrested and despite severe torture they did not relate any names and they did not reveal the name of the organization nor the names of the Poles who forged their papers. The Gestapo men themselves told "their friends" about one brave girl **Henia Lewin** of Warsaw, who spit into the faces of her torturers and fearlessly expressed her contempt and hate for them. All 15 were murdered.

As a result of this Aktion, the resistance organizations suffered great losses, especially among the groups whose members did not retreat from their battle positions and did not search for a haven in the factories (the Communists and the "Hashomer Hatzair"). The loss of the best fighters caused a depression in the ranks of the organization. This situation continued for a short time only, as reinforced groups returned to rebuild the organization. The "February Massacre" left no illusions as to the final plans of the Germans regarding the ghetto.

Recruiting new people progressed successfully. Special emphasis was placed on recruiting people from the factories, which were very quickly covered by a network of resistance movement cells. The partisan movement grew as well. The attempt of the first Aktion pointed clearly to the hopelessness of the war in the closed ghetto. Many young people who could not be accepted into the organization that operated in severe underground conditions and not on a mass scale, established groups on their own to act in the forest, and left the ghetto in order to fight against the cruel conqueror.

Others with greater capabilities armed themselves in various ways with firearms and turned eastward in order to link up with partisan groups. **Judyta's** group that dealt only with organizing brigades of partisans, attracted many young people.

In April 1943, a small group headed by **Berl Wasserstein** was sent out to familiarize itself with the terrain. They were poorly armed and were dispersed after an incident with the Germans near the Lipowy Most (the Most Bridge). After they lost contact with their liaison, they retreated back to the ghetto.

A second group comprised of 16 persons commanded by **Talk**, left the ghetto on the 24th of May. Right near the ghetto walls on Jurowiecka Street, a powerful incident developed with the Germans. One German gendarme was killed and the fighters retreated back into the ghetto without suffering any losses.

An additional attempt was made 10 days later – on the 3rd of June 1943 – and it too succeeded. While leaving the ghetto armed en route to a perilous mission, a very valuable service was given by 2 famous smugglers: **Nahum Abelewicz** and **Josel Kisler**. Both who were devoted fighters sacrificed themselves in the struggle against the Germans. **Abelewicz** fell on August 16, 1943 while leading the attempt to break through the ghetto walls. **Kisler** fell a few days later in the Izoby Forests when a plane-bomb was exploded and he and his friend the partisan **Grisza Lonski** were killed.

The groups also in Block "A" were forced by the pressure of the events to revise their attitude towards the partisanship. Although they did not give up the idea of an armed struggle inside the walls of the ghetto, they also began forming partisan groups. The first of these groups left the ghetto at the beginning of spring 1943, headed by **Borowik** and **Rywa Szynder**. With time, the command of this group transferred into the hands of **Jerzy Sochaczewski (Sasza)** from Warsaw, a brave and noble man, who was a printing worker by profession and the former sports coach for the "Morgenstern" organization. **Sasza** died a hero's death in the Izoby Forests on September 25th in an encounter with the Germans. In a similar manner, **Borowik** fell on January 2nd 1944 near Dwożysko. The general number of Jewish partisans organized in Białystok and who went out to the forests was about 150 persons.

The shortage of weapons caused great difficulties, and prevented the volunteers and the recruits to join this mission. Many of these who waited, were either lost in the ghetto during the final Aktion of August or in Treblinka and Majdanek.

The weapons shortage led to a long line of courageous operations, such as stealing guns from the weapons warehouses of the Germans on Sienkiewicza Street. On these missions, the following excelled: **Reuwen Lewin** from Wyszków, **Natan Goldstein** (both fell in the forests), **Welwel Wołkowyski** (fell in the Aktion), the heroine from Łódź: **Maryla Różycka**, and the brave partisan **Marek Buch** from Warsaw.

While smuggling arms into the ghetto, two anonymous Jews from Grodno (Hrodna) were caught. The Germans surrounded them but they defended themselves and killed one gendarme in Wysoky Stoczek. One of these fighters took his own life and the second was shot on the spot.

The fighting organizations kept a watchful eye on the German agents that swarmed in the ghetto. During the summer, 2 Gestapo agents were killed from resistance bullets: the brothers **Judkowski** and **Cwiklicz**, their names are mentioned only in dreadful disgrace.

The events of the 1st of May 1943 were evidence of the strengthening of the will to fight and to participate in the resistance movement. All the workers in the ghetto, without exception, celebrated the day of solidarity with the workers of the world. It is obvious they did not plan on going out into the streets and to partake in mass protests or stay home from work in the factories. The Gestapo would have immediately put an end to such an action. All the workers therefore, showed up at work near their machines, but the machines were inactive. The organization cells strewn in all the factories made sure no one would dare work. The workers joined the strike spontaneously and no one anywhere broke the strike.

Even the foremen responsible for manufacture did not dare oppose the strike. When they saw a German approaching, they immediately activated the machines and turned them off the moment the German left: in this way work came to a standstill in **Stefen's** mechanical carpentry, as well as the cartonage (kartonarz) machines, the workshops, the chemical factories, the large shoe factory; the sewing machines in the Judenrat sewing workshop did not operate (**Waksman**)^[5] and thus the entire ghetto became one large camp that in this way expressed its belonging to the progressive world, under the slogans of war of victory over fascism. They sang choruses of revolutionary songs and Red Army songs that penetrated into the ghetto from the Soviet prisoners, especially in the area of the 10th Cavalry Battalion. The song "Song of the Commissar" was especially popular and was sung at home and in the factories, especially the line "We will injure the German snake many times".

The general strike of the ghetto bore witness to the belief of 50,000 people doomed in the hands of the German executioners and also expressed admiration for those struggling with the enemy. For the Germans, it was a dangerous reminder.

It was the ridicule of a blood-soaked fate that right near the doomed ghetto, the Germans themselves were celebrating the 1st of May, as if it were their national holiday. From the blood-stained flags, the crooked nails of the swastika were extending.

Many drastic changes were taking place in the inner front of the resistance movement. Split forces and lack of united leadership were the weak side of the movement from its inception. This situation was the major reason that caused the failure of the organization in the first action. This realization was long understood by the many young people that were organized into various groups. The youth looked on with anxiety at the lack of understanding and lack of unity among the "heads" of the organizations. The damage stemming from this was so clear, the pressure from down below was so strong, until at the end of the summer, for the first time, unity was achieved between **Judyta Nowogródzka's** group and Block "A". And after some time, a connection was established also between Block "A" and shortly afterward Block "A" with Block "B" making it into one anti-fascist fighting unit.



Mordechai Tenenbaum 1940

Mordechai Tenenbaum was appointed as the head of the block. He was a known and appreciated public activist and highly regarded, an organizer and fighter from the "Halutz", and alongside him was **Daniel Moszkowicz** (a Communist). The management also included representatives of all the fighting groups.

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The biography of **Mordechai Tenenbaum (Tamarof)** source: Meilech Neustadt: Destruction and Rising, the Epic of the Jews in Warsaw, Tel Aviv 1946, page 302-303 (Hebrew)

Unfortunately this all took place too late. Before the newly united unit managed to organize itself, like a bolt of lightning on a clear day, they were informed that the final liquidation of the ghetto is to take place on August 16, 1943.



Members of the Białystok Jewish Underground

Top row far right: **Shlomo Goldstein, Tenenbaum**, Middle row 2nd from right: **Rywka Cyrlin**, Middle row 3rd from right: **Natan Blizowski**, Middle row 2nd from left: **Dan Gelbart**, Middle Row on the far left: **Moske Nowoprucki**, Seated on the far right: **Feiweł Wigdorhaus**, Seated 3rd from the right: **Yitzhak Perlis**, Seated 2nd from the left: **Avraham Gewelber**, Seated on the far left: **Dawid Kozibrodcki**.

While the action in February was known in advance by many people, especially by the Judenrat with **Barasz** at its head, the second Aktion came as a complete surprise to the ghetto, to **Barasz**, and even to the Gestapo in Białystok. Regiments of the German SS, Ukrainians, Byelorussians, and Latvians, who were secretly brought in, conducted the final Aktion. The August Aktion surprised many with "very persuasive" Aryan papers, those with Aryan looks, and even those who lived outside of the ghetto and happened to incidentally be visiting friends in the ghetto. They had been convinced that the ghetto would get advance warning in the event of an Aktion. These evaluations were dispersed by **Barasz** and his devoted admirers blindly believed him. And now they realized this was a grave error with tragic results.

There was never a better atmosphere full of hope like there was a few days before the Aktion. This was the period after Stalingrad, after El-Alamein, and after the victory of the North African campaign and the landing in Sicily. The removal of Mussolini from power determined the fall of Italy; the Eastern front shook, and on the 5th of August sounds of artillery from Moscow were heard for the first time. This signaled the liberation of Orlyá(Bel) and Białogród. Echoes of joy reverberated in the hearts of the ghetto residents.

Assistance was approaching, but the Germans decided to continue and win the war over the Jews.

The night between the 15th and the 16th of August was a tranquil moonlit night. The united staff of the resistance movement led by **Tenenbaum** met until midnight. At 2:00 A.M., an alarm sounded: the SS men surrounded the ghetto and entered the factories area. The taking over of the factories prevented the fighters from carrying out their pre-prepared plan: to set fire to the factories the moment they begin to fight. It was clear that the hour of final destruction of the ghetto had arrived. Within half an hour, the fighting groups were recruited; they prepared their arms, and took up pre-determined positions.

At 6:00 A.M., announcements were posted about the evacuation of the ghetto to Lublin. All the residents were to show up on Jurowiecka Street from where they will be further transferred. The Germans who gained experience in the Warsaw Ghetto, wanted to attract the residents from the large blocks - where it was easier to resist (the streets of Polna, Częstochowska, Nowy Świat, Kupiecka); out to the street where there were small houses and large lots which gave the Germans more space to manoeuvre. The attempts of the fighters to stop the stream of people into Jurowiecka Street failed. The masses filled the streets were shocked and discouraged.

All the groups of fighters from the areas that were abandoned by their habitants were concentrated in the region of Jurowiecka, especially in the streets of Ciepła, Chmielna, Śmolna, Nowogródzka, and Górna. The plan of the resistance headquarters was to destroy the ghetto fences, so that the crowd could be dispersed while the fighters could run into the forests and join their partisan comrades there. The fighters, who no longer concealed their presence among the throng, were joined by dozens of determined people armed with sticks, rods and stones.



Ghetto Białystok: Deportation,
Source: private collection [Ewa Kracowska](#)

The resistance fighters attacked first. It was 10 o'clock in the morning. The sign for war were the flames of fire on the streets of Ciepła, Śmolna, and Nowogródzka. These were the heroines: **Mika Datner**^[6], **Basia Koczalska**, **Chaja Biała**, **Henia** and others who set fire to homes, factories and to bundles of straw. On Fabryczna Street, the cotton factory was burning as well as the mechanical workshops. Heavy artillery was being fired from automatic machine guns and hand-guns. In this manner, the fighters destroyed all the

German guards who surrounded the ghetto and guarded the fences. The sight of dead German bodies and the firearms taken from them added encouragement to the fighters who threw themselves on the fences armed with grenades and bottles filled with benzene.

At the same time, the braver ones did not wait for breaks nor openings in the fences but instead stormed the fences themselves. The heavy fire of their comrades who shot above the burning fences covered them. But the Germans quickly took control of the situation. The very heavy fire rang out from the light and heavy machine guns and automatic guns and mingled with the sighs of the wounded and the cries of the fighters. The Germans set up machine guns on the windows of the houses and the factories surrounding the ghetto. From there, they had an excellent view and managed to inflict heavy losses on the ghetto fighters. The attack on the fences was thwarted with blood-soaked results.

A fleet of German planes appeared in the sky and flew at a low altitude over the heads of the fighters, and shot at them from above. The courageous fighters split into several units and continued shooting at the Germans. The war was not balanced. About 300 poorly armed Jews, fought against more than 3,000 SS soldiers, armed with mechanized firearms of all types. Helping the Germans were also Ukrainian and Byelorussian criminals. Nowogródzka and Śmolna Streets were covered with dead bodies. The fighters felt a shortage of people and arms and the fighting unit in the green gardens of the Judenrat on Nowogródzka Street held on the longest.

Here they were attacked by two rows of SS men from the streets of Ciepła and Poleska. The attack was warded off. The Germans had dead and wounded. They were nervous from the extensive gunfire exchange, and brought tanks into the battle. A mine that had been hidden in the opening of a sewage pipe on the corner of Kupiecka and Ciepła Streets exploded and caused the tanks to retreat. The fighters, 72 in all, were about to be surrounded, used all the weapons in their possession and retreated to a hiding place that had been prepared in advance in a well at 7 Chmielna Street. The Germans discovered them and fired at them from machine guns at the corners of Kupiecka and Jurowiecka Streets. The heroes fell crying, "Down with the Germans! Down with Hitler! Death to the fascists! Long live the Red Army! Long live Polish democracy! Long live Stalin! The People of Israel will not die! Avenge our blood!" No one begged for mercy.

The still warm bodies were loaded onto wagons and buried in a mass grave in the cemetery of the ghetto on Żabia Street, where the brave sons and daughters of the Jewish people are resting their eternal rest, in their death eternalizing the bravery of a nation.

After 3 hours, the battle weakened somewhat, and at 5 o'clock erupted again. The fighters renewed their attempt at bursting out through the fences, but in vain. The Germans uprooted the fences to permit a better area for maneuvering and brought in reserves.

The ghetto was surrounded by 3 rows of soldiers. From the first row, the Germans attacked with light automatic fire. In the second row stood units armed with mechanized automatic firearms, and in the third row were artillery and a regiment of cavalry. At night, 2 wounded fighters made their way to the Jewish hospital area on Fabryczna Street, and told the physician, **Dr. Cytron** who gave them medical assistance, that the weapons are running out and they are aware they are all going to die. But the mood among the fighters was good, as death is not so terrible when you die with a weapon in

your hand. At night, the fighter **Chaim Różonski** reached the hospital and told them that one of the fighting units began digging an underground passage from the ghetto to the outside.

The shots in the ghetto continued for several more days, especially throughout the nights. The fighters in the bunkers on Ciepła and Nowogródzka Streets managed to keep on fighting until the 26th of August. Some attempts were made to break out of the ghetto but these were unsuccessful. The last positions of the fighters fell after weapons ran out, and on August 27th a group of fighters succeeded in leaving via the subterranean tunnel and joined the partisans in the forest.

While fighting with the Germans near Cziliczanka, the courageous commander from Słonim fell: **Sonia Smidt**.

From many chapters that took place in this war, attention must be drawn to the unsuccessful assassination attempt of one of the executioners of the ghetto named Dibos, who was in charge of Jewish Issues in the Gestapo. He situated himself with his headquarters in the Judenrat building on Kupiecka Street, and from here controlled the liquidation operation. The fighter **Rubczak** shot him with 2 guns, but was killed by counter-fire, and the German dictator was rescued.

At the Woltan factory, between the machines, the fighters killed a high-ranking German officer and injured some of his friends.

From these fighters, only the brave **Chajka Grosman** survived, and from the 72 heroic fighters, only **Berl Szacman** remained alive under unknown circumstances. The commander of the fighters, **Mordechai Tenenbaum**, and his comrade deputy **Daniel Moskowicz**, committed suicide. The blockade of the ghetto lasted one full month and on the 15th of September 1943, after the last of the flames of resistance had been extinguished, the SS units retreated.

In this manner, the resistance movement of the Białystok Ghetto ended, and the fighters of Białystok added several pages of magnificent heroism to the chapters of grand bravery of their brethren in the Warsaw Ghetto.

Tens of thousands of Jews in the ghetto passively watched the war of the nation's best sons and daughters and did not partake in the struggle. In the afternoon, an order was received to begin moving out; the Jews of Białystok began their last journey in mute silence, between 2 rows of SS criminals who tormented them. Dry from thirst, they arrived at the Poleska train station and waited helplessly for the transport.

The Germans directed their one last joke in the heavy and crude German style. About [1200 children](#) were separated from their parents who were driven out of the ghetto, and "brought to Switzerland", via Theresienstadt Ghetto in Czechoslovakia, and from there to Auschwitz where their wandering ended.

Most shocking was the evacuation of the hospital on Fabryczna Street, in the old TOZ^[7] building. The Jewish doctors who survived the German hell of the death camps testified about the fascist methods of the German animal. The Germans did not touch the

hospital the first 4 days of the Aktion. On the 20th of August, the hospital of the Białystok Jews was broken into, by Friedel, an SS man and their judicial advisor, as well as by Ukrainians, who drove the patients out of their beds screaming, "Raus, Los, Schnell" (Out! Quickly!) These words were familiar to the millions of innocent victims who heard these words the last moments of their lives. Friedel, in an elated mood, speeded up the evacuation and occasionally said, "Quick! Quicker – a special train is already waiting for you!" The special train was comprised of horses' wagons standing in a line outside the hospital.

The patients in the Surgery Ward dressed slowly due to their surgical wounds and were beaten on their heads with fists and bats. The father of the caretaker **Fryda Ostrów** received special attention from one German criminal, although he was a weak old man with a white beard. After he was hit with a butt of a gun several times, he reacted in an unexpected way: he raised the cane he was leaning on, and struck the mouth of the soldier hitting him who became silent from amazement and fear. After coming back to himself, the criminal jumped on the bed of another patient, pushed his face with a shoe, and shot him with a barrage of bullets; the brain of the poor man spilled onto the wall. Shocked from this incident at the hospital, the nurse **Długacz** swallowed some cyanide poison. Upon hearing the shots, the criminals ran into the ward in a wild frenzy, threw the patients from the beds and with shouting and curses, forced them out into the wagons in their underwear. With great crudeness, they overloaded them into the "special train".

From the Obstetrical Ward, Germans carrying babies ran out, and they threw these babies like packages over their shoulders. Following them were the exhausted new mothers, assisting each other in walking.

They walked like the dead. No protest, no begging, no curses. The Germans threw the babies as if they were inanimate dead things. Around them could be heard loud crude laughter; the faces of these young human babies aroused laughter. The babies did not scream. They were already half-dead. From the wagon, only one choked whimper was heard.

The mothers could hardly find place on the second wagon. It was all over. Friedel gave the sign to proceed. The "Special Train" began moving. He marched and walked between the doctors and the nurses who stood petrified from this horrific sight. They moved through Kupiecka Street to Żabia Street. Here they were all shot and thrown into one pit: men, women and children. And this is how the evacuation of the hospital on Fabryczna Street was completed, on August 20, 1943.

RES SACRA MISER...!^[8]

The deportations of the Białystok Jews hastened east and its destinations were Treblinka, Majdanek, Bliżyn, and Auschwitz. Perhaps some people still had a bit of hope that they might be able to avoid the devices of death, but this possibility was non-existent for Jews.

In the Supraśl and the Knyszyn forests, the partisans from Białystok continued their armed struggle against the murderers of the Jewish people. This time they were united under one fighter (**Judyta's** group, **Sasza Sochaczewski** and **Eliasz Baumac**). From May 1944, these became part of one of the Soviet partisan units under General **Kapusta**, in the

brigade of **Kostia Kalinowski**, in the regiment of **Wojciechowski**, and in the brigade of the "Sailors" and the "26th of October". Some of them fell in battle, others survived to be witnesses to the torture of millions and to the bravery of groups of heroes who fought until the end against the Germans.

The Germans murdered more than 200,000 Jews from the region of Białystok, of these, 50,000 from the city itself. The crematoria of Treblinka, Majdanek, Auschwitz, and others swallowed the six million Jews of Europe, of these three million Jews from Poland. The passive suffering of millions of victims and the death of hundreds of thousands of children is appalling. In this tragedy, the only ray of light is the self-sacrificing war of the fighters for a better future for humanity. Tens of thousands of Jewish soldiers in Kościuszko's division, in the Red Army, in the troops of the coalition and the Jewish Brigade, as well as the fighters in the ghetto and the Jewish partisans. All these in their fight and their bravery, avenged the lives of the millions of innocent victims.

Epilogue

On the 3rd of November 1943, the infamous massacre of 20,000 Jews took place in Majdanek^[9]; most of these were the last Jews of Białystok. In a separate group, marching five in a row, consisted of small barefoot children, holding hands, with light clothes on, shivering from the cold and from fear.

From the loudspeakers could be heard the sounds of Strauss's waltzes, occasionally mixed in with the sounds of gunshots, and the SS men pushing the children on with cries of affection: "Hurry, hurry, soon you will be warm!"

Shivering from cold and from fear, the children were chased into the crematoria of Auschwitz.

Many "children's Aktions" are known in the many ghettos of Central and Eastern Europe. Adults required for work were alive for the time being, while the little children were led to their death. Their methods of killing children are known, which in comparison to, death with a bullet was considered merciful. The Germans erected death camps, murdered millions of children (the number of Jewish children alone reached 1 million) - teased humanity and... lost. And if they had won?! When a little child is killed, the angels in heaven weep. When a man murders a little child, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, millions of children, then perhaps the devil himself is in shock and his laughter is silenced in the depths of hell.

The Germans, after what they did in the years 1939 – 1945, and what they planned to do had they won the war... they themselves removed themselves from the family of nations and now they belong to humanity only in an anthropological sense.

To call a German a human – is a slap in the face for all of humanity. To call a German European – is an insult to the old continent. Germany accepted in its essence loyally and stubbornly the regime of Hitler until the end; the nation identified itself with his regime.

The German people, for six years, soaked in blood, in suffering, and in sweat of the conquered nations. The economic possessions in the hands of the Germans are largely stolen or burglarized.

The German people in the period of six years committed crimes worse than the darkest hallucinations possible, latent in the consciousness of the human animal.

The German people, had they won the war, would have committed thousand times far worse crimes... the blood of tens of millions of innocent victims, of women and children, cry for punishment for these crimes.

If ethics and justice rule in our relations between people and nations, then the above crying voice will be heard and woe be it if these basic rules will not be the basis of the relations between nations. In the eternal struggle between good and evil, light and darkness, this time the good and the light won, at a very costly price. And in the words of the Greek legend:

Ormoz overcame Aroman.

I believe in deep faith in the eternal human spirit.

I believe in deep faith that the German is not human.

MEMENTO GERMANIE! Remember what Germany has done to you!

Białystok, December 3, 1945

FOOTNOTES

^[1] "Heeresbaumt" was a construction company that operated outside the Białystok Ghetto. E.K.

^[2] Własow was a high-ranking Ukrainian officer. He was a traitor who organized a Ukrainian Army with tens of thousands of soldiers who served the Germans especially in the concentration camps and the ghettos. E.K.

^[3] Minsk was also the target of transporting Jews from various cities of Germany. During the Aktions about 130,000 Jews were murdered there. A.H.

^[4] "Auto de Fé" was a religious Catholic ceremony managed by the Inquisition, during the execution of its verdicts, usually by burning at the stake wretched victims. A.H.

^[5] **Waksman** was the surname of the Jewish director of the factory within the ghetto that sewed uniforms for the German Army, the Wehrmacht. Only Jews worked there. E.K.

^[6] **Milka (Miriam) Datner**, the daughter of **Dr. Szimon Datner**, was in the underground organization. She hid with [Ewa Kracowska](#). Her mother **Róża (Shoshana)** née **Samueli** from Kraków took her out of the hiding place in order to hide in a "better" hiding place, but both were killed with the second daughter **Lileńka (Shulamit)**. E.K.

^[7] TOZ: **Towarzystwo Ochrony Zdrowia [Ludności , Żydowskie]**. The Jewish Society for Protecting One's Health between the two World Wars. A.H

^[8] "Holy is the miserable one", Lucius Anaus Sanca A.H.

^[9] Operation "ERNTSEFEST" (The Harvest). On November 3, 1943, some 18000 Jews were shot to death in one single day at Majdanek. The same Aktion took place also in [Poniatowa](#) forced labor camp and Trawniki.

Few Members of the Underground in Białystok



Tema Sznajderman



Zerach Zilberberg



Daniel Moszkowicz



Tusia Altman



Riwka Madejska



Bronja Winicka



Jandzia Lajbach



Frumka Plotnicka



Chasia Bielicka



Chajka Grosman



Anya Rod



Maryla Różycka



Lonka Kozworocka



Marek Birk